

Between Nostalgia and Emancipation: Chinese Literary Allusions and the Crisis of Authenticity in Mori Ōgai' s The Wild Goose (1911-1913)

MILASI, LUCA

TOHOKU UNIVERSITY, CENTER FOR INTEGRATED JAPANESE STUDIES : ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

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Between Nostalgia and Emancipation: Chinese Literary Allusions and the Crisis of Authenticity in Mori Ōgai's *The Wild Goose* (1911–1913)

LUCA MILASI

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Japan experienced a profound social and cultural transformation typically described as “modernization” (*kindaika* 近代化), a multifactorial and nuanced collective process in which traditional aesthetic values, institutions, and cultural practices were confronted by newly emerging political debates and Western-influenced literary forms. Yet, it is generally understood that this dynamic between past and present—one in which the Meiji 明治-period (1868–1912) intelligentsia played a pivotal role—was not driven solely by Western-inspired sources but rather was shaped by their backgrounds and preferences in reforming literary trends and the societal roles those trends articulated. Meiji thinkers also drew significantly on Chinese literary classics and late imperial Chinese vernacular fiction, which helped shape modern Japanese aesthetics of this period. This contribution aims to reconsider the overall significance of the cultural influence these Chinese sources exerted on the modern discourse of reforming both literature and society. Indeed, even when it seemed that society had consolidated a new system, many Meiji- and Taishō 大正-period (1912–1926) intellectuals continued to read and reinterpret popular Ming and Qing “love stories,” and figures such as Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (pen name of Mori Rintarō 森林太郎, 1862–1922) frequently drew on them creatively, even while publicly debating their contemporary relevance.

This article examines the enduring influence of Chinese literature in shaping Japanese narratives from the latter half of the Meiji period to the early Taishō period. The discussion focuses on key motifs derived from various fiction formats, such as the *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 (Jp. *saishi kajin*, “scholar-and-beauty”) novella, the *qingshi* 情史 (Jp. *jōshi*, “love collections”), and *yinshu* 淫書 (Jp. *insho*, “dirty books”)—all rooted in the Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1912) tradition. I will critically review these collections as reinterpreted by Ōgai in his later novels, wherein he—already established as a notable though somewhat out-of-the-mainstream author—reshapes recurring literary motifs he deemed most relevant. Anticipating this fictional output, Ōgai had introduced these themes in critical essays dating from the late 1880s to the turn of the twentieth century, which I also discuss here in several occurrences, before turning to how references to Chinese fiction became a narrative tool for probing the crisis of representation and cultural authenticity in Ōgai’s novella, *The Wild Goose* (*Gan* 雁, 1911–1915).

Serialized when Meiji Enlightenment efforts had begun to lose momentum, *The Wild Goose* reconsiders the now-outlawed practice of concubinage through two contrasting perspectives, namely the nostalgic viewpoint of male characters who idealize the heroine according to Chinese romance tropes, and the emerging awareness of a female protagonist whose genuine

aspirations ultimately go unrecognized. *The Wild Goose* thus poses a key question of its era: how might traditional literary frameworks—Chinese as well as Japanese—remain operative in modern narratives at a time when new ideals of gender equality, monogamous marriage, and individual desire were taking shape? Specifically, Ōgai's reworking highlights a twofold theme in the seeming contradiction of the divergent fates of characters who confront an unrestrained—and at times destructive—amorous impulse (Ch. *qing* 情, Jp. *jō*). Traditionally, depicting strong emotions—particularly in female characters—was a hallmark of Ming culture and remained a persistent source of inspiration for Ōgai's modern storytelling. This legacy, whose complex implications need to be reframed both in the cultural specificity of the literary milieu that produced these narratives and as a counterpart to more mainstream views of the societies that witnessed their emergence, led a Japanese novelist from a different culture and time to reapply Edo 江戸-period (1600–1868) literary practices, which were themselves firmly grounded in the sustained reception of Ming and Qing texts, to his portrayals of contemporary life.

By the close of the Meiji period, interest had ostensibly shifted away from earlier debates on women's roles in society, and the position of women appeared to be more stable. Yet in his later fiction Ōgai seems to insist on focusing his reflections on the ostensibly outdated topic of concubinage—a once-prevalent custom in premodern China, Korea, and Japan. By Meiji times, the old practice of concubinage that had engaged audiences in more than one major work of premodern East Asian narratives had not only been outlawed in Japan, it was also culturally stigmatized as a hallmark of “uncivilized” and backward societies, indirectly leading to a rethinking of the value of the narratives that had showcased this phenomenon when it was considered somewhat more acceptable. However, Ōgai deliberately sets his narrative three decades earlier, in 1880, a time when these customs were still a potent social reality. As both Atsuko Sakaki and Keith J. Vincent note, this retrospective framing is a crucial authorial choice, as it allows Ōgai to use the “outdated” topic not as a simple anachronism, but as a lens to retrospectively diagnose the unresolved tensions of the Meiji period.¹ He examines a moment of cultural transition where the clash between inherited social norms (like concubinage, informed by a long Sino-Japanese tradition) and new ideals of monogamous marriage was most acute. Consequently,

most new works of fiction produced in Japan by Meiji authors that had been engaged in reading those same narratives portrayed it negatively, until Ōgai presented his own double-sided interpretation, examining it from both male and female perspectives. This new approach is especially evident in his later work, particularly *The Wild Goose*, which appeared serially in the years 1911–1913 and was republished in a volume two years later, where the narrative depicts a female heroine in a sympathetic light by virtue of her inner disposition; yet because the male characters remain fixated on Chinese literary archetypes, they misconstrue her behavior and ultimately judge her unfairly. In this novel, Ōgai revisits important preexisting fictional motifs from a gender-conscious viewpoint that contrasts with simpler portrayals, underscoring the stark gap in social roles and agency between male and female characters who inhabit the same cultural environment.

By examining Ōgai's literary allusions, marginalia, and critical essays, I argue that *The Wild Goose* does more than simply adopt Chinese “sentimental and fatalistic” motifs as an ironic foil to the heroine's plight: in my view, it also exposes a deeper tension in Japanese literary modernity—the difficulty of integrating (or discarding) cross-cultural inheritances in an era determined to forge a distinctly modern national authenticity. Although late imperial Chinese fiction had long been entwined with Edo and early Meiji popular culture, reformist critics increasingly dismissed it as backward or licentious. Ōgai's fiction, however, reclaims that legacy to foreground the silenced voices of women caught between old and new moral frameworks. In doing so, Ōgai contributes to broader debates on “love stories” (*jōshi*) and erotic literature, revealing that the complexities of female interiority and passion elude reduction to either moralistic Confucian frames or the newly emergent paternalism of Meiji society—in fact, *The Wild Goose* dismantles both. Far from a mere homage to Chinese works that had already underscored the tension between women's quest for emancipation and the society they occupied, the novella highlights a fundamental representational conflict: although male characters see the heroine as an extension of past Chinese heroines, she herself embodies a modern subject, whose personal longings arise from new forms

¹ Sakaki, *Recontextualizing Texts*, p. 139; Vincent, *Two-Timing Modernity*, pp. 45, 66, 84.

of individual consciousness—yet remain, in many respects, tragically at odds with the male gaze.

It is particularly important to note here that earlier literary debates concerning Ōgai's initial attempts at fiction had already unveiled a similar underlying tension in the interpretation of his female heroines. In defending them against criticism from fellow literati, Ōgai repeatedly invoked certain Chinese fictional models to illustrate his central views. Framing these ideas within the broader discourse on creating a reformed type of fiction suitable for Japan's modernization, his layered use of Chinese motifs refracts contemporary anxieties about Japan's aesthetic identity. Ultimately, I propose that *The Wild Goose* epitomizes a shifting modern perspective on gender, desire, and the literary canon—one in which established references gain fresh significance in the quest for a distinctively modern, yet historically rooted, sense of authenticity. This approach complements existing scholarship that has focused on the novel's brilliant internal mechanics. For instance, where Sakaki reads the text's "polyphonic narrative" as a performance that displaces authority,² and Vincent interprets its generic tension between "romance" and "realism" as a map of the narrator's homosocial rivalry with Okada,³ this article argues that these very narrative choices are the tools Ōgai uses to stage a larger cultural debate. The tension between the narrator and Okada is not just a personal or homosocial one; it is a conflict between two different ways of engaging with the past—a nostalgic, romantic mode versus a critical, modern one—that defined the Meiji intellectual world. The *Wild Goose* provides an extremely nuanced portrayal of nearly all its protagonists, with the notable exception of the narrative voice, whose inconsistencies have already been noted by Stephen Snyder.⁴ While male characters alternate between idealizing the female protagonist through the lens of a popular subgenre of Chinese-style fiction in late Edo and early Meiji and dismissing her seemingly free-spirited nature as akin to the female villain of Chinese licentious books, the heroine, Otama, is endowed with a growing self-awareness. She grapples with her true aspiration—emancipation from reliance on a man who deceived her by pretending his wife was dead. At this decisive juncture, the plot recasts

a recurrent dramatic motif from Chinese love fiction, even though the setting and overall perspective are distinctly modern. This is particularly evident in the depiction of Otama's inner psychological processes, which mark a shift from her originally good-natured and naïve disposition to a more disenchanting and independent one. While this introspective approach may be somewhat new to Chinese modes, it reflects the subtle characterization that premodern Chinese commentators prominently endorsed—commentaries that Ōgai and his circle of intellectuals acknowledged in essays I will examine.

This pivotal theme also reflects a consistent pattern in Ōgai's later fiction, wherein heroines confront the ramifications of fully conscious sexual desire—either yielding to it with dire consequences, as in the short story *Gyogenki* 魚玄機 ("Yu Xuanji," 1915), itself pointedly set in Tang China, or abandoning entirely the pursuit of their own longings, thereby giving up their chance at happiness, as in *The Wild Goose*. Early in the latter work, the narrative voice states:

Okada [the male protagonist] had a great fondness for the *Yuchu xinzhì* [虞初新志, ca. 1683], a collection of Chinese essays and stories, and one of the items in it, "The Big Iron Bludgeon," a tale of military prowess, he could all but recite from memory. It had long been his ambition to become adept in one of the martial arts, though he had never had an opportunity to do so. In the last few years, however, he had taken up rowing and had gone at it with such enthusiasm that, at the recommendation of his teammates, he had been made a member of the rowing team.

Another work in the *Yuchu xinzhì* that Okada liked to read was "The Life of Little Blue [Xiaoqing 小青]," a story of a beautiful but ill-fated young woman. The women featured in Chinese tales of this sort would, to put it in a somewhat novel fashion, keep the angel of death himself waiting on their threshold until they had meticulously applied their powder and makeup. Such women, for whom beauty was their very life, moved Okada deeply. He viewed women in simple terms, as beautiful beings, lovable beings, who could be content in any setting, and he felt it was his duty to guard and protect their beauty and loveliness. He unwittingly fell deeper and deeper under the spell of poems in "fragrant trousseau" style that dwelt on feminine charm, or the sentimental and fatalistic romances of the Ming and Qing literateurs.⁵

2 Sakaki, *Recontextualizing Texts*, pp. 139–41.

3 Vincent, *Two-Timing Modernity*, pp. 7, 51, 65.

4 Snyder, "Ōgai and the Problem of Fiction."

Vincent aptly characterizes this perspective as emblematic of the genre of “romance,”⁶ where Okada sees women through an idealized, aesthetic lens rather than as modern subjects. Building on this insight, my analysis shows that this “romantic” worldview is not generic but is constructed from a specific literary diet. The “sentimental and fatalistic romances” are precisely the Ming-Qing narratives of *qing* (passion) that Ōgai himself was critically reevaluating. Indeed, Okada’s characterization in the novel is so tied to his reading that his personality has been convincingly analyzed as a modern reimagining of the hero from “Daitessui den” (*Datiechui zhuan* 大鐵鎚傳), one of the very tales he admires.⁷ The point of interest here is that while Okada consumes these stories naïvely, Ōgai’s own marginalia on texts like *Qingshi* 情史 (*A History of Passion*), a Ming collection of stories further discussed below, reveals an ironic, critical distance.⁸ For example, where the narrator describes Okada’s idealization of the tragic heroine Xiaoqing, Ōgai’s personal note on the same story mocks the weakness of contemporary men compared to such female figures; thus, it could be argued that Okada embodies a superficial mode of engagement with the Chinese past that Ōgai deliberately contrasts with his own more complex, modern understanding. However, the prolonged engagement with Chinese fiction reveals a deeper connection in the way that some passages are consciously and indirectly recast into a new plot. The scholarly work of Lin Shudan, in particular, has shed light on Ōgai’s detailed annotations of *Qingshi*, arguing that his interest lay in the work’s complex portrayal of intellectually gifted and passionate heroines, a feature that is common to characters from such diverse background as Elise and Otama.⁹ Passages like the one above might seem extraneous to the plot of *The Wild Goose*, and could conceivably be removed without altering its basic structure. Yet, as Chiba astutely observes,¹⁰

such remarks foreshadow the male character’s inability to fulfill the heroine’s expectations, and by introducing these allusions, the narrative anticipates the story’s tragic outcome. It is essential to stress that the Chinese woman character invoked in this passage does not reflect the author’s own view of that character: rather, Ōgai’s marginal note in his copy of *Qingshi* is a revelatory remark—“Many illustrious gentlemen nowadays are so lacking in bravery (*mukikotsu* 無氣骨); if only Xiaoqing could see them!”—which demonstrates that he read Ming/Qing texts in a personalized, even ironic way, comparing their characters to the Meiji male elite. It thus becomes clear that his engagement with Chinese female archetypes was both interpretive and ironic, anticipating how he would later treat such figures in novels such as *Vita Sexualis* and *The Wild Goose*.

Hence, *The Wild Goose* deploys a twofold perspective, juxtaposing the heroine’s inner life with the male protagonist’s inability to recognize her true circumstances—constrained, in part, by his reliance on Chinese romance tropes. This dynamic underlies the novel’s unfulfilled romance, showing that the male character’s viewpoint is consciously embedded by the author to delineate his attitude. By the time the narrative relates Otama’s transformation, the author’s focus contrasts this male vision of a “Chinese beauty patiently waiting for the angel of death,” tending to her appearance in front of a mirror.

Ōgai first sets the scene by describing the students Otama observes from her window, establishing her as a spectator of the male world she is excluded from. But the narrative perspective quickly moves from this external observation to a deep dive into her psyche:

At this time, the majority of the students affected the brash, swaggering air that later came to be known as “the hero’s pose.” . . . And then one day she became aware of something that startled her, something that seemed to have sprouted in her mind. Engendered in the realm below the threshold of consciousness, it suddenly burst upon her in the form of crowded imaginings that filled her with alarm.¹¹

5 Mori and Watson, *The Wild Goose*, pp. 14–15; the Chinese transcription has been edited for consistency.

6 Vincent, *Two-Timing Modernity*, pp. 66, 71.

7 Lin, “Mori Ōgai Gan to Gusho shinshi no ‘Daitessui den’ o megutte,” pp. 94–95, provides a close reading of the parallels between Okada and Daitessui, focusing on their shared characteristics of being laconic yet resolute (*kagon* 寡言, *kadan* 果斷) and skilled in both literary and martial arts (*bunbu ryōdō* 文武兩道).

8 Ōgai’s handwritten annotations can be viewed in his personal copy of *Qingshi leilüe* by Feng Menglong. The volume is held by the Library of the University of Tokyo, which owns the copyright. The IILF manifest is available at <https://iilf.dl.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/repo/s/ogai/document/491d1056-205d-4026-8e13-446608cod33c>.

9 While this article strives to link Ōgai’s idea of literary criticism to commentaries featured in specific editions of the kind of Chinese fiction he read, it has to be restated here that a detailed analysis of Ōgai’s annotations in *Qingshi* and their connection to the *caizi-jaren* ideal in his early fiction is provided by Lin, “Mori Ōgai to Min-Sei shōsetsu *Jōshi ruiryaku*: *Maihime*, *Utakata no ki*, *Gan* o chūshin ni.”

10 Chiba, *Erisu no ekubo*, pp. 219–34.

This “sprouting” of consciousness is triggered by Otama’s realization of her true circumstances. Having become a mistress to support her father, she is horrified to learn her patron is a moneylender. This forces a pivotal moment of self-reliance:

With no other objective than to ensure the comfort and happiness of her father, Otama had argued away the objections of the straitlaced old man and taken up life as a mistress. . . . When she arrived at the house by the pond, however, and saw with her own eyes its tranquil life, she could not bring herself to inflict this pain on the old man. Instead she determined that, bitter as it might be, she would reveal her cares to no one. With this decision Otama, who had always relied on others, for the first time learned what it meant to stand alone.¹²

This newfound independence creates a split between Otama’s external performance and her internal self. She begins to consciously perform a role for her patron, Suezō, while her true self watches with disdain. This marks the birth of a complex, modern interiority:

From then on, she began quietly scrutinizing her own words and actions. When Suezō came, she no longer met him with her former unreserve, but set about consciously to welcome and entertain him, putting to one side for the moment her true self. And this self laughed in ridicule at both Suezō and his plaything, Otama. . . . It seemed to her that, for all her lack of fine upbringing and education, she was utterly wasted on such a person.¹³

From this internal critique, a desire for emancipation naturally follows, as the heroine begins to search for a “trustworthy young man who would rescue her from her present predicament.” Her journey from passive object to a self-aware, critical subject is complete.

In the excerpts above, too, Ōgai indirectly raises an issue concerning women’s growing self-awareness and unrecognized drive toward independence at the dawn of Japan’s modernization. This concern appears notably contemporary and may well have been shaped by his research in hygiene—a discipline that later evolved into modern sexology—during the latter part

of his stay in Dresden, Germany (1884–1888), where he also developed an interest in Freud’s psychoanalysis. Simultaneously, Maeda¹⁴ underscores Ōgai’s continued engagement with Chinese literary themes, particularly after his return from Germany—citing how he read important works like *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 (The Plum in the Golden Vase) at that time: according to Maeda, Ōgai would occasionally pen the German equivalents of Chinese sexual terms in the margins of his copy of the novella. This, too, may suggest that Ōgai’s references to “dirty books” and other erotically charged forms of Chinese fiction share a conceptual affinity with his empirical study of characters’ psychological dynamics.

Recasting in his mature fiction his own experience in retrospect, with faint autobiographical overtones, helps illuminate Ōgai’s consistent view of the paramount importance of Chinese studies in shaping his personal conception of modernity. From a young age, he had been trained in *kangaku* 漢學 (that era’s Chinese studies), and in his youth, he kept diaries entirely in *kanbun* 漢文 (Sinitic prose), continuing to compose *kanshi* 漢詩 (Sinitic poems) throughout his life, all activities that underscore that Chinese learning was never a casual pursuit but, rather, a central part of his literary and intellectual identity. Even during his extended stay in the West—evidenced by excerpts from his early diaries, usually referred to as *Doitsu nikki* 獨逸日記, which cover his time in Germany and notes from the early 1880s—he continued to reflect consistently on Chinese texts, despite being immersed in Western medical and literary studies. Likewise, in the *Kokura nikki* 小倉日記 (the diary he kept circa 1899–1902, partly in *kanbun*), we see that reading and writing in Chinese remained lifelong habits, not merely youthful training he later abandoned. These diary snippets confirm that Ōgai’s “Chinese lens” was never an afterthought; it influenced his worldview and literary methods from the very beginning. His engagement with Western Romanticism, German literature, and more, took place within a setting in which Chinese literature was recast as another “foreign” influence potentially integral to the cultural reforms needed to modernize the nation’s literary trends and social outlook.

His critical stance is further highlighted in several essays where Ōgai debates methods of reading texts

11 Mori and Watson, *The Wild Goose*, pp. 97–98.

12 Ibid., pp. 98–99.

13 Ibid., p. 99.

14 Maeda, “Ōgai no Chūgoku shōsetsu shumi,” p. 51.

aloud with the prominent scholar of English literature, Tsubouchi Shōyō 坪内逍遙 (pen name of Tsubouchi Yūzō 坪内勇蔵, also written 雄蔵, 1859–1935). Their engagement with Western thought, despite their different views, helped Ōgai realize both the cultural specificity and the limitations of traditional Chinese training in Japan. A key example is his 1891 essay, *Rōdokuho ni tsukite no sō* 朗讀に就きての戦 (On the Debate Regarding Methods of Reading Aloud Texts).¹⁵ Here, Ōgai begins by drawing a fundamental distinction between texts written by Japanese authors in Sinitic style and authentic Chinese works, arguing that the latter demand a different approach. He acknowledges the inherent difficulty in the method he proposes, particularly regarding historical phonology, but insists it is the only way to achieve true comprehension:

*Nihon gaishi*¹⁶ (An Unofficial History of Japan) is a Sinitic-style composition by a Japanese author; however, the *Shi ji*¹⁷ (Records of the Grand Historian) and *Yueyang Lou Ji*¹⁸ (A Record of the Yueyang Tower) are Chinese texts written by mainland Chinese. To read them properly, one must first master their grammar and pronunciation, reading the text from beginning to end and imitating the original Chinese sounds. It is an understatement to say that pronunciation changes over time, and given the objective difficulty in clarifying how the language sounded before the Western Han dynasty, it is hard to maintain that reading ancient texts aloud [as they were originally pronounced] is truly possible. However, if one masters this “linear” method of reading, without a doubt the structure of the syntax will be grasped.¹⁹

Ōgai then launches into a sharp critique of what an informed reader would recognize as the standard Japanese practice of *kundoku*, the set of methods or conventions devised to read Chinese classic texts by rearranging characters to fit Japanese syntax, framing it

as an unnatural and roundabout method of “decoding” rather than reading, and concludes by dismissing both the sound produced by this method and the shallow critiques of his contemporaries, such as Aeba Kōson 饗庭蒿村 (1855–1922):

It is utterly unnecessary to first translate the text word-for-word into our language and then read the phrase by reverting its word order into Japanese. And yet, when it comes to how we Japanese read Chinese today, we do not truly “read” the text at all: we assign a Japanese reading to each character and then read this translated construction aloud, hoping to grasp its meaning. When I was living in Europe, I described this practice to several Europeans. . . . upon hearing my explanation, they were so astonished as to label it a “bizarre, unheard-of method.” The voice produced by this bizarre method can hardly be called natural. . . . and despite the crude and baseless ridicule from the likes of Aeba, it scarcely deserves to be called a form of Japanese elocution, as it feels entirely unnatural. This way our countrymen read Chinese texts ought to be a private shame, not something to be boasted of with pride, and it most certainly should not be the basis for the practice of reading aloud.²⁰

This passage underscores Ōgai’s early commitment to treating Chinese literature as “genuinely foreign”: this peculiar philological reading was essential for his work as a translator and is crucial for understanding how he later adapted Chinese motifs in works from *Maihime* 舞姫 (“The Dancer,” 1890) to *The Wild Goose* (1911–1913). He championed this rigorous method to distinguish his approach from flawed traditional practices. Ōgai dismissed the illusion of accessing a text via *kundoku*, which he framed not as a true translation, however literal, but as a mechanized, formulaic kind of exegesis akin to an alternate form of coding.

By dismantling the illusion of easy familiarity offered by the *kundoku* method, Ōgai was paving the way for his unique use of intertextuality. This move was crucial, as the traditional reading practice was ill-suited for the vernacular Chinese fiction whose peculiar sensibilities Ōgai was keen on recasting in the new novel format. He was thus establishing the central principle of his

15 For the full text, see Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 22 kan, pp. 353–58.

16 *Nihon gaishi* 日本外史, a history of Japan by Rai San’yō, was completed in 1827.

17 The *Shi ji* 史記, or “Records of the Grand Historian,” was compiled by Sima Qian and his father. The work is generally considered to have been completed around 94 BCE.

18 *Yueyang lou ji* 岳陽樓記 is a famous prose-poem written by Fan Zhongyan in 1045.

19 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 22 kan, p. 356.

20 Ibid., pp. 356–57.

method: only by first grasping a text on its own “foreign” terms could one then successfully “domesticate” its spirit for a contemporary Japanese audience.

Seen in this light, the prolonged engagement of his male protagonists with Chinese fiction can be viewed as a deliberate reframing of Ōgai’s critical position. Their simplistic reading serves as a subtle social critique of the Meiji literati who drove literary reform; consequently, the “dullness” of his male characters becomes a revealing commentary on their flawed, nostalgic worldview. This is exemplified in Okada’s interpretation of the *Story of Xiaoqing* 小青傳 (*Xiaoqing Zhuan*).²¹ The tale, found in two distinct collections in Ōgai’s library, depicts a Chinese concubine who reportedly fell into disgrace after her master repudiated her due to the jealousy of his official wife. Her refusal to eat and subsequent death from consumption can be interpreted as an act of protest, underscoring the abrupt upheavals that toppled Ming social and cultural norms, ultimately eroding women’s agency and significance.

The so-called cult of *qing* (passion) that had attracted the attention of Ōgai and other literati may originally have carried symbolic overtones in that the allegory of women’s lost chances at love also served a political purpose, expressing grief at the downfall of Ming rulers and their circle.²² Drawing on his manuscript notes—particularly the entry titled *Shina genkyō* 支那現況 (The Contemporary Situation of China)²³—it becomes clear how Ōgai had gained access to pivotal historical information on the last two Chinese dynasties, enabling him to interpret these portrayals from multiple perspectives. Such readings could recast the depiction of freer female sexuality in Chinese vernacular fiction. Yet, unlike the author himself, the male characters in *The Wild Goose* remain oblivious to these implications. Indeed, in a later scene, the narrator likens Otama’s puzzling behavior to the destructive, sexually explicit conduct of Pan Jinlian 潘金蓮, who in *Jin ping mei* goads her lover into killing her husband.²⁴ Subsequently, Jinlian became the archetypal “venomous woman” (*dufu* 毒婦, Jp. *dokufu*). In reality, however, both Otama and Jinlian begin their respective stories as a “woman at

the window” (*mado no onna* 窓の女), gazing outward yet also inward—sensing the stirrings of their innermost hopes and rekindling the possibility of a brighter future.

Ōgai’s “Global Poetics” of the Novel: From Chinese Models to Modern Realism

The idea that the newly conceived novel (*shōsetsu* 小説) should give free rein to “warm” human passions (love, desire), rather than merely upholding moral/Confucian virtues, is something Ōgai champions in mid-Meiji debates and literary journal editorials. This “warmth of love” as opposed to the “coldness of virtue” debate periodically referenced from Ōgai’s earlier manuscripts illuminate his longstanding fascination with the legitimacy of desire—a fascination partly fueled by Chinese “licentious” novels. A brief overview of how, in his earliest critiques of the late 1880s, he cites Chinese commentators to validate a deeper psychological approach may be helpful here to show how that approach justifies greater emotional complexity in female characters, rather than one-dimensional stereotypes, in his later fiction.

By the time he wrote *The Wild Goose*, Ōgai was effectively testing—or dramatizing—the theoretical positions he had set out in those earlier essays, allowing Otama’s “warm desire” to clash with social restrictions imposed by male characters who themselves read Chinese tales only superficially. This reveals not only Ōgai’s debt to Chinese fiction but also his critique of how modern men were (mis)using it to romanticize or demonize women. The first hints of this multilayered outlook appear in Ōgai’s early theoretical essays on the novel. Following his initial critique of the newly introduced Naturalism—which he began addressing in short pieces such as *Igaku no setsu yori idetaru shōsetsuron* 醫學の説より出たる小説論 (Literary Theories Derived from Medicine, 1889)—Ōgai offers a more extensive discussion of fictional prose writing in a longer essay,

21 As I have noted, the *Story of Xiaoqing* exists in multiple versions and is of uncertain origin. The two collections owned by Ōgai and relevant to this article are Feng Menglong’s *Qingshi* (ca. 1621) and Zhang Chao’s *Yuchu xinzhì* (ca. 1683).

22 Li, “Early Qing to 1723,” pp. 195–97.

23 Reprinted in Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 37 kan, p. 74.

24 The composition date of *Jin ping mei* is uncertain, as the novel was penned under a pseudonym. Scholars generally date its writing to the late sixteenth century, c. 1582–1618. The specific edition owned and annotated by Ōgai, which is central to this article’s argument, is the *Diyi qishu* 第一奇書; this version includes an influential commentary by Zhang Zhupo 張竹坡 (1670–1698) and has a preface dated 1695.

Ima no shoka no shōsetsuron o yomite 今の諸家の小説論を讀みて (Reading Contemporary Theories on the Novel, 1889) that I will reference several times in this article.

Perhaps his first attempt at a general categorization of fictional methods and value, *Ima no shoka no shōsetsuron o yomite*, also illustrates how Naturalists like Émile Zola (1840–1902) treat psychological introspection as a purely scientific analysis of man's basest instincts. Yet, according to his view, centuries ago, Chinese commentators such as the influential editor and critic Jin Shengtan 金聖歎 (ca. 1610–1661) insisted in his work on the fourteenth-century novel *Shui hu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Water Margin*) that the art of the novel lies in realistically detailed portrayals of each character's interior nature. Ōgai reinforces several times throughout this article how those who rely *only* on outward analysis reduce the novel to a dull imitation of raw life, while on the other hand, idealistic stylization—which he identifies with instances such as the *caizi-jiaren* trope, or Bakin's²⁵ artificially rhetorical style—yields a schematic romance that lacks the modern method of psychological analysis, then proceeds to suggest to integrate both the power of imagination and this method of introspection, as the truest path for a new Japanese novel:

We can thus affirm that the radicalization of the realist novel's poetics essentially leads to a poor outcome: the slavish reproduction of natural reality, with no possibility of deviating from it. This, let us say, is the flaw of the Naturalist school. Nevertheless, excessive idealism in art, the antithesis of naturalism, also is not without its flaws. Consider Romanticism in Germany or the *yomihon* 讀本 of the Japanese premodern period: both literary genres deviate too far from the real world. In such fiction, one might encounter a romantic encounter between a man and a woman, yet these heroes and heroines are depicted in an unrealistic manner, closely resembling what an ideal couple should be. Consequently, they undoubtedly lack the unique realistic ambiance that

would transform them into original characters, portrayed in the compelling manner advocated by proponents of the modern realistic novel, such as Shōyō. Furthermore, characters in this type of fiction often reach a point where they all appear similar, exhibiting either all-good or all-bad traits, devoid of nuances in virtue or malice.²⁶

This passage marks one of the earliest instances where Ōgai explicitly invokes Chinese premodern vernacular fiction, which he will later reinstate via an analysis of Jin Shengtan's critique of *Shui hu zhuan*, connecting it to Western realism, psychological depth, and Meiji-era novel reforms (such as those championed by Tsubouchi Shōyō and others):

The method of psychological introspection has become widespread since the end of the last century, in parallel with the rise of so-called “realist” philosophical tendencies; this evolution is clearly recorded in literary history... It must be emphasized that from the very dawn of the modern novel, this method has enabled writers to faithfully portray the individual characteristics of each character. However, the tendency toward psychological introspection in Eastern literature did not begin with the advent of [Tsubouchi] Shōyō; the existence of novels with such features was already evident to notable Chinese and Japanese commentators. For instance, Jin Shengtan says of *Shui hu zhuan*: “The greatness of this work lies in its portrayal of one hundred and eight types of human character, which concretely translate into one hundred and eight types of human feeling. Other works, despite aiming to describe a thousand different figures, always reproduce the very same type. Their characters therefore fall into only two categories, good and evil, which are in reality one and the same.” This serves as proof for the aforementioned point. Both major narrative forms—the single-plot novel and the grand saga or epic—require the use of the psychological introspection method.²⁷

His complex argument, reiterated throughout the work and encapsulated here, demonstrates that Ōgai's critical stance on the novel—prioritizing deep character introspection—already acknowledges the Chinese tradition

25 Takizawa Okikuni (1767–1848), better known by his pen name Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴, was a highly influential and popular novelist of the late Edo period, famous for his sprawling historical romances (*yomihon*). Ōgai, Shōyō, and the literary critics that were engaged in debating the value and modes of fiction and had been avid readers of Bakin's narratives in their youth understandably refer to his works.

26 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 22 kan, p. 72.

27 Ibid., p. 79.

as a key precedent in his very first fiction theories. This ties directly to the way he constructs female interiority in later works such as *The Wild Goose*, where the link between Ōgai's heroine and Pan Jinlian grows explicit at the end of chapter XIX. There, the narratorial voice—a character loosely modeled (though not without apparent inconsistencies that scholars have already discussed) on a fellow student and male friend of the protagonist—expresses concern that Okada, absorbed in *Jin ping mei*, might in fact have stumbled upon “a Jinlian in disguise.”²⁸

Both *Jin ping mei* and the *Story of Xiaoqing*, the two most frequently cited Chinese narratives in Ōgai's novel, were widely popular in China. The latter formed part of the plot of one of the most celebrated works of traditional Chinese theater, *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (*The Peony Pavilion*), by the Ming playwright Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616)—arguably the most renowned sentimental drama of the late Ming and early Qing. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the difficulties of its language, this drama—though extremely popular in Qing China—served as the principal precursor to the sentimental-erotic tradition that later influenced novels like *Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢 (*The Dream of the Red Chamber*), but while *Hong lou meng* was familiar to Ōgai's contemporaries in Japan (and was even reedited in Japanese during that era), there is to this day no conclusive evidence that *Mudan ting* circulated widely in Japan between the late Edo and early Meiji periods. Nevertheless, Ōgai explicitly references what seems to be an alternative or abridged name for this same drama, listing it among the Chinese masterpieces noted in an entry from his *Chiritsuka* 塵塚 (*The Scrapbook*),²⁹ a two-volume set of miscellaneous notes compiled and bound during his demotion in Kokura 小倉, Kyushu, from 1899 to 1907. This set of notes is now housed in the Ōgai Library (Ōgai Bunko) at the main library of the University of Tokyo.³⁰

The comparison between the heroine of *The Wild Goose* and Jinlian, even if only viewed through the lens of the male narratorial perspective, evokes several contrasting perspectives rooted in the moral judgments attached to Jinlian herself. In new attempts at fiction

penned in Japan during the 1880s and 1890s, women characters were often contrived presences, apologetically crafted by male authors. This trend extended to the first popular translations of Western works, such as *Karyū shunwa* 花柳春話 (*Spring Tale of Flowers and Willows*, 1878–1879), an abridged adaptation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Ernest Maltravers* (1837) and its sequel *Alice* (1838). That translation reflected the public debate of the 1870s and 1880s about monogamous marriage, concubinage, prostitution, and egalitarian education.³¹

In practice, however, at this stage of evolution of Japanese modern fiction, a woman's presence in the plot was often justified solely by her complementary role in establishing an orthodox family. Although Ōgai's fiction reproduces this male-biased perspective, his allusion to Jinlian instead prompts readers to envision a far more complex character—a sensuous woman who is not entirely condemnable. Even premodern Chinese commentators had repeatedly argued that the goal of the “dirty” *Jin ping mei* was not to indulge in mere pornography but rather to provide serious social criticism, a view known as the “antierotic” (*fei yinshu lun* 非淫書論) perspective that I will elaborate on shortly; all the more so in the modern eye of a moderate, yet considerate reformist such as Ōgai, who had read precisely these earlier interpretations in the *Di yi qishu* 第一奇書 (*The Most Marvelous Book*) edition of *Jin ping mei* that he owned and annotated. Confronted with this complex and ambivalent understanding, he may have realized that Japan's earliest reformed fictional works which were intended to suppress “unenlightened” practices such as concubinage, and were often regarded as a product of unrestrained male sexual desire, exhibited serious limitations. Ōgai's concubine character is compelling in ways that, although clearly literary, elicit sympathy rather than condemnation, precisely because she seeks to express a more natural, less constrained sexuality.

By the turn of the century, it had also become clear that many practices fundamental to the Edo social system—particularly the imperative to produce a male heir—persisted well into the first half of the era of enlightened civilization (*bunmei kaika* 文明開化). In this context, Ōgai's decision to revisit the subject of concubinage in *The Wild Goose*, serialized in the early 1910s—despite ongoing efforts to establish a new

28 Mori and Watson, *The Wild Goose*, p. 159.

29 For a full-text transcription of the manuscript notes, see Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 37 kan, pp. 39–91.

30 The passage, titled *Shina haishi* 支那稗史 (*Narratives of China*), is reprinted in Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 37 kan, p. 75.

31 Poch, *Licentious Fictions*, pp. 92–97.

household model forbidding polygamy—stands out as somewhat unconventional. Here, his heroine Otama becomes the protégée of an avid usurer, forced by material needs.³² Ōgai's portrayal captures a time when many women, including the first noteworthy female writers, lacked vital means due to social structures that entitled only men to support themselves and their families. Otama's acceptance of her fate—yet her simultaneous inclination to fall in love with a local student glimpsed through her window, where she is confined because of her sponsor's jealous wife—creates a platonic romance reminiscent of Chinese novellas, destined never to be fulfilled. Such an authorial choice arguably stems from Ōgai's conviction, voiced in public debates, that fiction should favor the “warmness of love” over the “coldness of virtue.” Indeed, his earlier definition of the novel, emphasizing psychological detail, emotional realism, and the importance of passion—seen in his female characters from Elise to Otama—reveals how, despite variations in each character's fate, they all emerge from intersecting Sino-Japanese-Western narrative frameworks. This supports the idea that Ōgai's allusions to Chinese fiction in *The Wild Goose* are not an isolated late-career flourish, but rather the culmination of decades of reading, writing, and theorizing on how Chinese story collections could reinvigorate Japanese fiction—particularly in representing women's interiority and sexuality. Far from peripheral or episodic, his recourse to Chinese intertexts shaped his entire career and informed his modern conception of women's agency, love, and social constraints in the Japanese novel.

Until his demotion to Kokura—where he kept his *Chiritsuka* manuscript notes—Ōgai had also led more than one literary circle that provided support for prominent female writers of the time, including Hiratsuka Raichō 平塚らいてふ (pen name of Hiratsuka Haru 平塚明, 1886–1971) and Higuchi Ichi'yō 樋口一葉 (pen name of Higuchi Natsu 樋口夏, 1872–1896). As suggested earlier, it seems Ōgai was inclined to compare the fierce character of these women writers with their Chinese predecessors. Their voices resonate with the robust advocacy for love found in the works of the notable Chinese novelist Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1645), particularly his *A History of Passion*, *Qingshi*, already noted above. Bringing together various tales

focused on strong emotions, *Qingshi* reevaluates central romantic themes of Tang fiction and Yuan theater in a literary style accessible to early Meiji Japanese intellectuals. In doing so, it presents Menglong as a forerunner of the idea that literature should be autonomous from social or moral dictates, with love at its core—two concepts that Ōgai upheld as crucial tenets of his own poetics. Notably, Menglong may also have composed, under a pseudonym, one of the prefaces to the edition of *Jin ping mei* that Ōgai owned, alongside his copy of *Qingshi*, as “the Pearl Juggler of Eastern Wu.”³³

Apparently, Ōgai was so fond of Menglong's love collection that he likened Elise, the main female character of his debut novella *Maihime*, to Menglong's heroines who “were able to pick their husband by themselves” (*jie xia nuzi neng zi ze pei zhe* 節俠女子能自擇配者) in a noted subsection of Menglong's collection, aptly advocated in his reply to a critical review of the work on the German dancer Elise.³⁴ At first glance, this parallel may seem questionable; however, once the broader context is considered, Ōgai's stance becomes clearer: in his literary endeavors, he maintained an emphasis on the social role of new theories and literary works—central to contemporary discourse—yet never abandoned the poetics of earlier fiction. Instead, he balanced old and new approaches in his novels and critical essays, integrating freedom of literary representation with considerations of the emotions involved.

To delve into more detail, following the publication of his earliest narratives—later known collectively as the *Doitsu sambusaku* 獨逸三部作 (The German Trilogy)—Ōgai was criticized by Ishibashi Ningetsu 石橋忍月 (pen name of Ishibashi Tomokichi 石橋友吉, 1865–1926), a prominent voice in early Meiji literary criticism and contributor to the women's magazine *Jogaku zasshi* 女学雑誌. Ningetsu claimed that *Maihime*'s title misleadingly evoked the plight of a refined noblewoman akin to figures in certain classical Chinese and Japanese works, whereas Elise, the novella's heroine, was a humble-born dancer eking out a marginal existence on the outskirts of a modern German city. Ōgai responded with two open letters published in literary journals, one titled “‘Maihime’ ni tsukite Kidori Hannonjō ni tauru sho” 『舞姫』に就きて氣取半之丞に與ふる書 (Letter to Kidori Hannonjō [Ishibashi Ningetsu's pseudonym]

32 Deguchi, *Mori Ōgai, jibun o sagasu*, pp. 102–3.

33 Schonebaum, *Approaches*, p. 26.

34 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū, dai 22 kan*, p. 159.

Concerning the Short Story “*Maihime*,” 1890).³⁵ In these letters, Ōgai robustly defends Elise against the charge that she is “a trivial, ignorant dancer,” stating:

I do not myself question the literary merit of *Maihime*, nor do I endeavor to ascertain it by asking others. However, upon learning of the judgment you have passed, I have reflected on the matter, as a sort of consolation to myself. . . . You stated that when you saw the title *Maihime* advertised in the papers last winter, you believed it would concern an accomplished artist with a vast following, only to discover, upon reading the work, that the “dancer” of the title was in fact a “foolish and illiterate girl,” a woman “lacking discernment and determination.” . . . I harbor my doubts about this idea that the title characters of novels must not be foolish or ignorant or weak, but must instead be “artists with throngs of admirers” . . . It does not seem to me that Nana was free of these flaws, and yet the great French writer Zola chose her name for the title of a novel; and people have not scorned this taste for coarseness from the Naturalist school by calling the title pernicious. Whether this is due to my own foolishness, . . . what I know is only this: that for me, Elise is very much like a new Zhuo Wenjun or a Yang Hongfu.³⁶

Excerpts such as the one above detail Ōgai’s clear vision of Chinese works as, in a sense, integral to rethinking a modern model of fiction. Already by the time he authored *Maihime*—his first short story set in a contemporary context with a female protagonist—he was explicitly linking a Western dancer-heroine to Chinese “free-choice” heroines from *Qingshi*. Such remarks scattered throughout his earlier work confirm a widely accepted view that Chinese literary references do not play a role only in his mature fiction such as *The Wild Goose*: conversely, since Ōgai openly cited *Qingshi* as early as 1890 to validate a self-determining modern female figure, his later quotations of Chinese fiction in *The Wild Goose* can be seen as a further elaboration of a line of reasoning that had shaped his general literary perspective in peculiar ways. In essays like *Ima no shoka no shōsetsuron o yomite*, where he compared *caizi-jiaren* romances to Bakin and German Romanticism, he stressed psychological introspection,

revealing that—beginning in 1889—he was already deploying Chinese love-fiction frameworks to critique Meiji novel theories. In his exchange with Ishibashi Ningetsu, Ōgai had praised Elise as a “modern Wenjun” or “Yang Hongfu,” suggesting how Sino-inspired heroines were central to his goal of modernizing fiction, in which female characters held a pivotal role. This trajectory clearly does not commence with *The Wild Goose* but rather with *Maihime*.

In *The Wild Goose*, Ōgai explicitly associates Pan Jinlian (in *Jin ping mei*) and Xiaoqing (in *Qingshi*) as “sentimental and fatalistic” archetypes that the male characters (Okada and the narrator) impose on Otama—a move recalling Ōgai’s earlier debates with literary contemporaries over portraying women either as idealized romantic figures or according to modern principles of psychological realism. In short, for Ōgai, examining Chinese fiction was never just a matter of “traditional background.” From 1889 onward, he strove to treat Chinese texts on a par with European ones, shaping a new Japanese novel that merged Sinitic, Western, and native elements. His systematic engagement with Chinese sources, which informed both his early critical writings and his later works, not only exemplifies the Sino-Japanese-Western interconnections that scholars have increasingly recognized in his oeuvre but also underscores how Chinese motifs were integral to his vision of modernizing the Meiji/Taishō novel. A closer look at the premodern Chinese forms he adopted—forms that defy easy categorization—will help to reinforce this view.

The Role of Chinese Traditional Fiction Formats in Shaping Ōgai’s Literary Criticism: *The Wild Goose* as a Modern Recasting of the *Caizi-Jiaren* Novel

Apart from *Qingshi* and its precursors, the reference to “sentimental and fatalistic” fiction in *The Wild Goose* encompasses other relevant references to other subsets of Chinese formats. An analysis of the mix of eroticism and tension between the status of the male and female protagonists suggests that the novel may be viewed as a deliberate, somewhat pessimistic reimagining of the *caizi-jiaren* format. This genre, which flourished in mainland China approximately between the 1650s and 1670s, typically featured protagonists of literary talent and beauty who overcome

³⁵ The complete text is reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 158–65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.

various plot twists—mistaken identities, cross-dressing schemes, and so forth—to secure romantic unions through courage and resourcefulness. Such narratives often culminated in success in the imperial examinations and marriages officially sanctioned by family and court.

Originally, *caizi-jiaren* stories differed sharply from refined Tang novellas such as *Youxianku* 遊仙窟 (Dalliance of the Immortal's Den, late seventh century), which Ōgai owned, or *Yingying zhuan* 鶯鶯傳 (The Story of Yingying, ca. 804), a work by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831) that later inspired a highly popular theatrical piece on which Ōgai, as we will see, commented extensively. Yet this *caizi-jiaren* style appealed to students flocking to Tokyo, likely because it highlighted core themes that resonated with the emerging Meiji male elite. It is this somewhat naive reading that Ōgai challenges in his later fiction, which recreates the cultural and social milieu of the early Meiji decades. Ōgai's viewpoint gradually superseded more conventional understandings of Chinese fiction's aims and significance. Moreover, by incorporating a specific set of traded interpretations of Chinese commentators—found in marginal notes, prefaces, and postfaces—into his own examination, Ōgai offered a fresh perspective entirely anew. His familiarity with such masterworks as *Shui hu zhuan* includes an understanding of Jin Shengtan's distinctive reworking of the base text; Jin famously edited out sections that might underscore moral ambiguities in the protagonists' heroism, potentially undermining the vernacular novel's prestige in literary discourse.³⁷ In revisiting the controversy over how best to balance virtue and passion, Ōgai seizes on this very point to frame his own approach to character portrayal.

Jin Shengtan is widely acknowledged as the originator of vernacular fiction criticism in imperial China,³⁸ and Ōgai's own fictional critique often draws directly on Jin Shengtan's ideas. Similarly, Ōgai's concept of *qing*—the depth of sentiment that encompasses diverse, sometimes opposing feelings—appears in his essays, reflecting Menglong's advocacy for the legitimacy of such emotion. Additionally, Ōgai owned a particular version of *Jin ping mei* known as the *Di yi qishu*, a reprint (sans illustrations) of a popular woodblock edition. This

version included Zhang Zhupo's 張竹坡 (1670–1698) extensive commentary titled *Dufa* 讀法 (“manner of reading the work”).³⁹ There is evidence that Ōgai studied Zhang's commentary closely, particularly its shift in perspective away from the text's reputed licentiousness—an approach akin to that of Menglong and Jin Shengtan. The *Di yi qishu* edition, which differs notably from the *Cihua* 詞話 (literally, “words to a tune,” or “oral tale”) edition in its arrangement and content of the first chapter, was the most widely circulated version of the novel in late imperial and early modern China.⁴⁰ In Ōgai's copy, he marked passages he deemed relevant, wrote character names in the margins of extensive sections, and penned personal notes in the *dufa* commentary. One portion, which clearly influenced Ōgai's own approach to fiction, begins by elevating the novel to the level of canonical historiography, arguing for its structural complexity:

Jin ping mei is a sort of supplement to the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shi ji*). However, while the *Records of the Grand Historian* contains both monothematic and collective biographies, treating each one as a separate transmission, *Jin ping mei* is a complete work of one hundred chapters that collectively combines individual biographies into one single textual tradition... It is self-evident that those who could craft *Jin ping mei*'s narrative structure would certainly be capable of composing *Records of the Grand Historian* as well. Why is this? Because, since the manner of commanding the narrative structure of *Jin ping mei* is already so challenging, there would be no difficulty in making it into a more straightforward format.⁴¹

In the quotation above, Zhupo insists on the novel's legitimacy as a complex art form, which is also a view central to Ōgai's own project of modernizing Japanese fiction. Crucially for Ōgai's eclectic and anti-dogmatic poetics, Zhupo then pivots to a critique of narrow-minded critics who praise one work by

37 Chang, “Literature of the Early Ming to Mid-Ming,” pp. 51–53.

38 Ibid., p. 93.

39 The full text of this commentary can be consulted in its digitally encoded version at Ctext: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=936192>. In this article, the original version of translated passages from this edition is reproduced in the footnotes.

40 Schonebaum, *Approaches*, pp. 14–16.

41 《金瓶梅》是一部《史記》。然而《史記》有獨傳、有合傳、却是分開做的。《金瓶梅》却是一百回共成一傳、而千百人總合一傳、內却又斷斷續續、各人自有一傳、固知作《金瓶》者必能作《史記》也。何則？既已為其難、又何難為其易。

denigrating others. In a passage Ōgai marked in his own copy, Zhupo declares:

Whenever one criticizes a book, they have a tendency to lean on the strategy of denigrating other works instrumentally. They seem unaware that literature is a communal, shared entity; if this work is exquisite, why can't other works be exquisite as well? ... Criticizing someone's work in such a manner, insisting that theirs is the only excellence, is a narrow-minded and biased approach that fails to produce good literature. Without creating good literature, how can one criticize the good literature of others?⁴²

This perspective—that literature is a “communal, shared entity”—resonates powerfully with Ōgai's own method of drawing from Chinese, Japanese, and Western sources to create a new literary synthesis. The Chinese commentator then concludes:

My pointing out that the *Records of the Grand Historian* is “easier” than *Jin ping mei* is because I affirm that the *Records of the Grand Historian* is fragmentary while *Jin ping mei* is cohesive. Now, if the author of *Records of the Grand Historian* were to come back to life, he would surely contend that I lean toward *Jin ping mei* to favor it. But I am not suggesting that *Records of the Grand Historian* is inferior to *Jin ping mei*. Even so, *Jin ping mei* manages to capture all that makes the *Records of the Grand Historian* such a fine work. The merits and flaws of literature can only be truly understood by those with sensitive hearts; I can merely appreciate the excellence of the writing of the literature I am concerned with. Why would I care whether they are ancient or modern, or debating and apologizing on their behalf?⁴³

Ōgai makes numerous annotations on these passages, including a reference to Rudolf von Gottschall's

(1823–1909) work on poetics.⁴⁴ In his own handwriting, he notes “Literature is a collective entity” (*wenzhang nai gonggong zhi wu* 文章乃公共之物) in the margin of the printed text, and marks in red ink those sections where Zhupo alludes to the inconsistencies of the traditional canonization that linked fictional narratives to historiography and deemed the former inferior to the latter.⁴⁵ These marginalia reveal the extent of Ōgai's engagement with Zhang Zhupo's ideas about the novel's significance. As I will illustrate shortly, even in the context of a newly emerging concept of the literary canon, Chinese literary criticism directly influenced Ōgai's modern fiction in several revealing ways.

The main venue in which Ōgai advocated for his approach to narratology was critical writing (*hyōron* 評論), which became a central concern for intellectuals seeking to reform the novel during the Enlightenment era. A paramount example that may be aptly resumed here is his first fiction theory essay, already mentioned above, authored in November 1889, *Ima no shoka no shōsetsuron o yomite*: in addition to the overt reference to Chinese literary criticism already outlined above, this complex piece of work presents a method that runs counter to Shōyō's new ideas, extensively citing Chinese theories on fiction. At this stage, Ōgai appeared to be formulating a “criticism of criticism” (*hyōron no hyōron* 評論の評論).⁴⁶ Undertaking so ambitious a project, he drew liberally from Western, Japanese, and Chinese sources—both well-known and obscure—linking French, German, or Russian contemporary authors to *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (The Tale of Genji) or *Shui hu zhuan*. Seemingly ahistorical in approach, the essay attempts to show how the Edo-period inheritance of both Japanese and Chinese classics is more integral to a new literary canon than Shōyō and other reformist critics realized. Ōgai also raises the

42 每見批此書者、必貶他書以褒此書。不知文章乃公共之物、此文妙、何妨彼文亦妙？我偶就此文之妙者而評之、而彼文之妙、固不掩此文之妙者也。即我自作一文、亦不得謂我之文出、而天下之文皆不妙、且不得謂天下更無妙文妙於此者。奈之何批此人之文、即若據為己有、而必使凡天下之文皆不如之。

43 Zhang, Dufa, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=936192>, sections 34 to 36. 吾所謂《史記》易於《金瓶》、蓋謂《史記》分做、而《金瓶》合做。即使龍門復生、亦必不謂予左袒《金瓶》。而予亦並非謂《史記》反不妙於《金瓶》、然而《金瓶》却全得《史記》之妙也。文章得失、惟有心者知之。我止賞其文之妙、何暇論其人之為古人、為後古之人、而代彼爭論、代彼廉讓也哉。

44 Rudolf von Gottschall was an influential German literary critic. His main theoretical work, *Poetik* (1858), offered a comprehensive, systematic classification of literary genres and principles. For Ōgai, seeking to establish a modern theory for the Japanese novel, Gottschall's systematic approach would have provided a key Western theoretical model, paralleling the methodical “manner of reading” (*dufa*) found in Chinese literary commentary.

45 Ōgai's handwritten annotations and highlighted passages are visible in the digitized print now held at the Library of the University of Tokyo. The IILF manifest is available at: <https://iilf.dl.itc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/repo/s/ogai/document/ofab37ab-086c-49b3-98b8-81c0a3e0a56c#?c=o&m=o&s=o&cv=7&xywh=-791%2C0%2C6558%2C3911>.

46 Ogura, “Sannin Jōgo,” *‘Unchūgo’ no Ōgai*, p. 122.

fundamental question of how, and to what extent, fiction should represent sensual love:

At this juncture, novel theorists have come to recognize the significance of psychological introspections, yet this recognition serves as a means to the end of solidifying a poetics of narrative, not an end in itself. When one endeavors to preserve belletristic concerns, it becomes imperative to exercise restraint in representing sheer reality. Instead, one should infuse the craft of creative endeavor to purify its impurities through the power of imagination, relying on its nullifying force to strive for thematic structure. Consider, for instance, the Naturalism of the esteemed French writer Emile Zola. While relying on psychological introspection, Zola, each time, disregarded the standard of aesthetics, giving rise to the narrative form he termed “études.” Upon close examination, the flaws of this approach become apparent—by “water,” he single-mindedly refers to “dirty water,” and by emotion (*jō*), he narrowly alludes to the base sex drive (*in'yoku* 淫欲).⁴⁷

By the time he recorded these reflections, Ōgai's rigorous childhood training in Chinese studies at the domain school had ended, as had his solitary readings of Bakin, Tamenaga Shunsui 為永春水 (1790–1844),⁴⁸ and Chinese vernacular fiction borrowed from traveling book-lenders during his years at Tokyo Imperial University. These materials introduced him—and many of his contemporaries—to the concept of *ninjō* 人情, human desire, in somewhat old-fashioned yet persistently popular narratives, described in detail by Daniel Poch.⁴⁹

Perhaps owing to this background, when discussing his early literary theories, Ōgai tends to adopt terminology from the Chinese tradition in a broad sense. This does not imply that he neglected to situate premodern Japanese and Chinese narratives in their original historical and cultural contexts; rather, he maintained that these narratives offered more for fiction reform than newly emerging critics—who dismissed earlier models as “uncivilized” and “unmodern”—were prepared to

acknowledge. He uses the terms *tanhai* 単稗 and *fukuhai* 複稗—two compounds derived from the Chinese concept of fictional prose as “unofficial history” (*haishi* 稗史)—to denote single-plot novels and sweeping sagas, respectively. He also introduces the term *saishi kajin* 才子佳人 to describe, more generally, a romantic genre in which male and female protagonists meet by chance, not necessarily confined to Chinese literature. Such heavily Sinicized language surely resonated with him and his older contemporaries, yet because words embody cultural realities, it is hard to determine how fully this reliance on Chinese rhetoric transferred those older literary conceptions into current debate.

Undoubtedly, *caizi-jiaren* fiction, popularized in Japan by *gesaku*⁵⁰ writers of *ninjōbon* and revitalized through the efforts of Lu Xun⁵¹ and later Masuda Wataru, markedly appealed to Ōgai, who enjoyed works like *Yanshan waishi*⁵² (The Informal History of Mount Swallow), closely following its core elements in his own fiction.⁵³ In his *Shōsetsuron*, however, he extends the definition of *caizi-jiaren* well beyond its Chinese origin, employing it almost as a stand-in for “romantic” fiction. The following excerpt from *Reading Contemporary Theories of the Novel* illustrates this tendency:

The discourse on the value of Zola's theories has led to the conclusion that utilizing scientific analysis as a foundation for fiction creation might not be an erroneous concept. However, there is an undeniable sense that the outcomes of scientific inquiry alone, as Zola has endeavored in his studies, may not constitute the optimal material for fiction. Scientific inquiry portrays the real world, yet must writers confine themselves within the limited boundaries of such a world? I hold the view that, while science may serve as a commendable foundation for a novel, it is through the power of imagination that the most desirable results are extracted from such

47 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū, dai 22 kan*, p. 71.

48 Shunsui was a leading novelist of the late Edo period and the primary exponent of the *ninjōbon* 人情本 (“books of human feeling”) genre, which focused centrally on the theme of *ninjō* in the romantic lives of commoners.

49 Poch, *Licentious Fictions*.

50 *Gesaku* 戯作 is a broad term for popular fiction of the late Edo (1603–1868) period, while the *ninjōbon* was a major sentimental genre within this category.

51 Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) was a foundational writer of modern Chinese literature. Masuda Wataru 増田渉 (1903–1977) was a Japanese scholar of Chinese literature who helped reintroduce *caizi-jiaren* novels to modern readers and met Lu Xun in Shanghai in the early 1930s.

52 *Yanshan waishi* 燕山外史, a *caizi-jiaren* novel by Chen Qiu, was published in 1810.

53 Hiraoka, “Maihime,” pp. 16–23.

impoverished material. . . . It is reasonable to assume that adhering too strictly to the rules of the realistic novel results, in fact, in a mere, uninteresting imitation of the real world, devoid of any artistic merit. This, in my perspective, elucidates the failure of the Naturalists' endeavors as works of art.⁵⁴

It is paramount that in presenting his first systematic theory of the novel, Ōgai draws extensively on insights from earlier Chinese and Japanese scholars regarding realistic narration and psychological portrayal. Engaging Shōyō's arguments on the primacy of the psychological novel, he cites two Chinese critical sources—the preface to *Yuchu xinzhì* by the scholar Zhang Xinzhai, and the influential commentaries on *Shui hu zhuan*—which both stress fine, realistic characterization as the key to high-quality fiction. Zhang Zhupo emphasized this as well in his commentary on *Jin ping mei*, which, on the Japanese side, also figures prominently in *Hyōshin ryōi roku* 標新領異録 (Scattered Remarks on Classic Masterpieces), a debate record transcribed in 1897 that I will discuss below.

In his early novel theories, Ōgai appears to take a more serene and receptive stance toward past literature than many of his contemporaries, including the influential Tsubouchi Shōyō. This is not to say that Shōyō entirely dismissed tradition—he frequently cited older writers like Bakin—but Ōgai's method was distinct. To theorize a “new” novel form and reinforce his own convictions about realism, Ōgai drew more extensively and systematically on Chinese literary criticism. He demonstrated this, for instance, by lauding the perspicacity of Feng Menglong's preface to the story collection *Shidian tou* 石點頭 (The Rocks Nod Their Heads, 1627). Ōgai remarked that it was “very good to observe,” as Menglong does, how “the storyteller traces the cause to its effect in order to encourage people to perform good deeds. By opening a pure and expedient path of teaching, they can enable even the stubborn and foolish to attain sudden enlightenment from their accumulated delusions.”⁵⁵

Despite the traditional framing of this passage, with its Buddhist overtones, Ōgai uses it to highlight a key aesthetic principle: for him, Menglong's model exemplifies the true artist's purpose, which goes beyond mere

objective representation. While the scientist's gaze strives for objectivity, the artist's interest lies not just in seeing an object, but in penetrating it to infuse it with the essence of lived experience. This is precisely the quality he found lacking in Naturalism. As such, Ōgai deemed Zola's mistake to be attempting to write fiction with the detached eye of a scientist, a method that could only describe the surface—the “dirty water”—while missing the inner struggles and complexities of the human mind.

This method of using Chinese sources to critique the flaws of contemporary fiction is a cornerstone of Ōgai's argument in *Reading Contemporary Theories on the Novel*: to build his case against the one-dimensional characters found in both Japanese *yomihon* and certain Romantic works, he again turns to a Chinese authority, strategically quoting the preface by the scholar Zhang Xinzhai 張心齋 (style name of Zhang Zhao 張潮, 1650–1709) to the collection *Yuchu xinzhì*, to argue that the demand for psychologically authentic characters was not a uniquely Western concern, but had deep roots in the Chinese critical tradition itself:

In his “Preface to the New Collection from Yuchu,” scholar Zhang Xinzhai asserts that among the writings of authors from both past and recent times, numerous works excessively rely on unmannered and fictional character portrayals that tend to be either overly joyful or excessively distressed. Despite the prolific output of these authors, their stories commonly share the defect of lacking detailed, genuine descriptions of the characters involved. While these narratives may amuse both the young and old, they fail to reveal the true nature of mankind, often presenting situations that may make you laugh but lack authenticity for matters that are genuinely somber.⁵⁶

Such arguments link the theorizing of the psychological novel to its potential importance in various narrative genres, implicitly reopening the possibility of crafting a grand saga—traditionally associated with the premodern *yomihon*—that can still meet contemporary expectations. Eager to contribute a distinctive point of view on reforming fiction, Ōgai encouraged his fellow intellectuals to develop a more innovative outlook, one that recognized the value of a premodern literary heritage.

54 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 22 kan, pp. 71–72.

55 Ibid., p. 77.

56 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 22 kan, p. 71.

A Newly Crafted Apology of Love: Revisiting Mid-Meiji Debates

In addition to the *caizi-jiaren* fiction format, the foundational themes anticipated in his essays—and later incorporated in *The Wild Goose*—find early expression in Ōgai's reflections on another notable Chinese drama, *Xixiang ji* 西廂記, in an essay published about eight years after his initial discussions. Throughout his role as an essayist, Ōgai engaged in debates about the intrinsic value of literature as a realm of free, unfettered creativity, unbound by social or political constraints. The contradictions involved in affirming the value of sensual love and instinctive attraction only within the confines of “civilized,” heteronormative marriage are evident in his dense critical remarks from the 1890s.

These criticisms arise against the backdrop of a major transformation in Japanese literary circles during the first half of the Meiji era, exemplified by pivotal texts such as *Unchūgo* 雲中語 (Words Uttered Amidst the Clouds, 1897). This seminal work—focusing extensively on contemporary literature—followed the success of an earlier debate transcription, *Sannin jōgo* 三人冗語 (Jokes of a Trio, 1896). Both record collective public debates originally held at the Kanchōrō 觀潮樓 lodging, where Ōgai and his literary circle met regularly until his demotion in Kokura. Another recorded debate, *Hyōshin ryōi roku*, specifically addresses premodern narratives, documenting discussions on Japanese, Western, and Chinese premodern fiction, representing a renewed focus on earlier works. Prominent figures like Ōgai, Kōda Rohan 幸田露伴 (pen name of Kōda Shigeyuki 幸田成行, 1867–1947), Harada Naojirō 原田直次郎 (1863–1899), Saitō Ryoku'ū 斎藤緑雨 (pen name of Saitō Masaru 斎藤賢, 1868–1904), Yoda Gakkai 依田学海 (real name Yoda Mō 依田百, 1834–1909), and Mori Kainan 森槐南 (real name Mori Chikara 森樸, 1863–1911)—the latter two being noted Sinologists who contributed to Ōgai's training in Chinese—played key roles in these debates. Much of their discussion centered on the Chinese narrative *Shui hu zhuan* in Jin Shengtan's revised edition. Its considerable influence on Meiji literary discourse is underscored by Kainan's remarks, excerpted below:

Now, let us delve into the style of *Shui hu zhuan* in greater detail. I venture to say that, if judged by today's standards for literary merit, this novel stands at the pinnacle of finely and effectively crafted works in the entire Chinese

literary canon. Its startling simplicity renders the text easily understandable to anyone with even a modicum of education. The shift from one dialect to another in the narration depends on the region where the action takes place. . . . This becomes most apparent when comparing various sections of the text. The chapters concerning Pan Jinlian differ significantly from the rest, as they delve into an overtly explicit story. The author of *Jin ping mei*, considering this unconventional part of the story the most interesting, pens his own version, incorporating these two or three chapters into his narrative. While the plot of *Jin ping mei* may not be as captivating as that of *Shui hu zhuan*, it surpasses the latter in terms of subtle, accurate descriptions. The chapters narrating the death of Li Ping'er, from the moment everyone gathers at her sickbed to her last breath and subsequent engraving, span over one hundred pages, compiled into a single volume. It is easy to comprehend why Professor Gakkai [Yoda Gakkai] praised it, stating, “it is truly unfathomable to realize how accurate and realistic a description it is without reading it.” If one were to seek in Chinese fiction what is generally sought in Western literature, novels that approach such keen representation are undoubtedly *Jin ping mei* and *Hong lou meng*. As for *Shui hu zhuan*, its objective is to portray all the peculiar traits of the Chinese. It is neither a historical fiction nor a romance of love; it belongs to a genre that is halfway between the two.⁵⁷

In these instances, we see the Meiji intelligentsia developing and sharing a more nuanced understanding of Chinese romances. Within this context, Ōgai's critique of Wang Shifu's 王實甫 (late thirteenth century) *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Wing) reveals his deep involvement in ongoing debates about the interplay of morality and sentiment in fiction. By challenging the usual Confucian moralist attacks on the play, he enriched broader discussions about the inherent value of literary representation.

To illustrate the relevant sections of Ōgai's speech on the subject, the writer begins by comparing *Pipa ji* 琵琶記 (The Story of the Lute, completed ca. 1367) and *Xixiang ji*—traditionally hailed as the exemplars of Northern and Southern theater, respectively. *Pipa ji* deals with filial piety, *Xixiang ji* with passionate love, states Ōgai before remarking in his commentary how

57 Mori and Kinoshita, *Ōgai zenshū*, dai 24 kan, p. 531.

love is often dismissed as a “base” or animal-like appetite, whereas filial devotion is considered a noble virtue. Yet, he contends, while *Pipa ji* is formally classified as virtuous drama, its characters gain depth only through interpersonal conflicts—such as the father’s ambitions and the minister’s self-centeredness. According to Ōgai, this same logic holds for *Xixiang ji* but in reverse: the strong-willed lover Junrui, initially viewed as merely driven by desire, confronts social norms in a way that demonstrates positive determination. In contrast, Bojie of *Pipa ji*—the model of virtue—emerges as a weaker, more passive figure.⁵⁸

These opening remarks unveil the conceptual linkage between Ōgai’s perspective on the persistent themes of passion and virtue in Chinese dramaturgy and his broader views on narratorial poetics and the discourse surrounding the reform of fiction in early Meiji Japan. The example subsequently provided by Ōgai is crucial to this analysis as it illustrates a fictional plot that alludes to the imperative need for a comprehensive reconsideration of the role of love within the heteronormative framework of marriage. The example subsequently provided by Ōgai is crucial, as it provides the direct conceptual framework for *The Wild Goose*. Ōgai begins his assessment by challenging the conventional hierarchy that privileges virtue over love:

As I mentioned earlier, filial piety has long been esteemed as honorable, while passionate love, often branded as a base instinct, is not deemed as worthy a subject of narration as virtue itself. It is easily understandable why literary works centered around virtue have traditionally been regarded as the greatest. However, I would like to reassess this supposed superiority of Virtue, and to do so, I must begin with a clear exploration of the relationship between Virtue and Love.⁵⁹

To deconstruct this binary, Ōgai presents a detailed hypothetical scenario involving a man who becomes wealthy and must decide whether to remain with his “humble wife” (*sōkō no tsuma* 糟糠の妻). He argues that the question of virtue is entirely dependent on the presence or absence of genuine love. He complicates the scenario by imagining two possibilities, directly

foreshadowing the central dilemma of Otama’s subjective experience:

Let’s consider a more complex example than the one above: a man, a husband, who was once poor but has now become wealthy. He has had a wife since his penniless days. Will he discard his simple, humble wife now that he has attained good fortune? . . . She might be a mature woman, still beautiful, active, and reliable despite their poverty. . . . But what if this wife is unattractive, ill-mannered, someone her husband would hesitate to acknowledge in public given his newfound status? . . . In the first case, there is love and passion between the two; in the latter, neither exists.⁶⁰

From this, Ōgai draws a radical conclusion that becomes the thematic core of *The Wild Goose*: the conviction that social and moral judgment is a symptom that appears only when authentic passion is missing.

Yet, even in this more intricate example, one thing is clear: there will be no problem regarding virtue when that “simple wife” has been loved by her husband from the start. . . . However, when there is passionate love, people won’t question virtuous or non-virtuous behavior. It is only when love is absent that the issue of virtue is raised; in this case, people intrude, pleading for moral behavior and blaming vice.⁶¹

This leads to his famous reformulation, a direct critique of both Confucian moralism and the cold rationality of Meiji “Enlightenment,” and provides the framework through which the plot of *The Wild Goose* operates: “I only wish to affirm that, to me, desire (*yoku* 欲) is not vile (*hikui* 卑い), it is warm (*ataakai* 暖かい), and virtue (*toku* 徳) is not valuable (*takai* 貴い), it is cold (*hiyayaka* 冷やか).”⁶²

The conceptual link between Ōgai’s treatment of Chinese premodern formats as outlined above and the narrative structure and overall scope of *The Wild Goose* is evident, as the latter work depicts precisely an unfulfilled romance in which a selfish husband, who deceives both his wife and mistress, becomes the *deus ex machina* of the heroine’s downfall. The parallel between this plot

58 Ibid., pp. 614–16.

59 Ibid., p. 617.

60 Ibid., pp. 617–18.

61 Ibid., p. 618.

62 Ibid.

and the earlier discussion of *Xixiang ji* provides an illuminating conceptual antecedent, one that sheds new light on the overall significance of narrative structure of *The Wild Goose*. Early Meiji narratives had attempted to curtail “base” sexual instincts by promoting monogamous marriage—an effort to reconcile spontaneity in romantic sentiment with more “enlightened” or rational concerns. Yet this first wave of Meiji-era fiction was largely shaped by male elite perspectives and scarcely reflected women’s lived experiences. In Ōgai’s interpretation, which stands out as a unicum in this context, love by itself suffices both as a fruitful subject for literary representation and as a powerful social force—so much so that moral and social anxiety arise only where love is absent.

By reinscribing motifs from late imperial Chinese romance into the modern setting of early twentieth-century Tokyo, *The Wild Goose* exposes overlapping tensions of nostalgia, social reform, and individual longing. Even as male characters cling to Chinese literary tropes that misinterpret the heroine’s intentions, her struggle to escape concubinage exemplifies the deeper crisis of authenticity engendered by Meiji reform. Rather than dismissing the Chinese canon as “unenlightened,” Ōgai reclaims its emotionally charged depictions of *qing* (passion), using them to lay bare the gaps and contradictions in Meiji-Taishō moral strictures. In doing so, he reopens a longstanding debate on the primacy of virtue versus passion, showing how desire—particularly a woman’s desire—cannot be silenced by social proclamations alone.

Placing *The Wild Goose* within the broader theme of a crisis in authenticity and representation reveals how reintroducing older Chinese romances went beyond fueling simple male nostalgia. It offered a lens through which to pose new questions about woman’s self-determination, sexuality, and narrative form. In *The Wild Goose*, that tension prompts the emergence of a proto-“new woman,” whose unspoken aspirations highlight the chasm between official reformist rhetoric and the reality confronting Meiji and Taishō women. On a more general level, Ōgai’s work broadens our understanding of Sino-Japanese cultural interplay in the construction of modern aesthetics, bridging past and present to challenge some of the era’s most entrenched assumptions. Ōgai’s Taishō-period fiction, then, transforms contemporary Tokyo into a near-roman à clef, peopled with students and intellectuals who embody both the idealistic reading habits of the day and the half-realized reformist

energies of Meiji society. In earlier novels—such as Shōyō’s *Tōsei shosei katagi* 当世書生氣質 (1885–1886) or the now largely forgotten *Kajin no kigū* 佳人之奇遇 (1885–1897) by Tōkai Sanshi 東海散士 (real name Shiba Shirō 柴四郎, 1852–1922)—we see similar explorations of emerging elites shaped by aspirational texts. Yet *The Wild Goose*, composed roughly two decades after the events it purports to depict, weaves these recognizable types into a new genre that blends historical fiction with realist psychological insight. This framework lends verisimilitude to the novel’s social critique and reveals how personal desires often clash with official ideologies.

At the same time, this vision underlines the author’s conviction that literature is an autonomous realm. While Ōgai was by no means opposed to moderate reforms, he refused to let fiction become a mere instrument for disseminating prescriptive social messages. In *The Wild Goose*, he centers women’s voices to highlight how overlooked the gender question had been, even among progressive circles. Just as Chinese and Japanese premodern sources had often assigned women pivotal if frequently tragic roles, Ōgai likewise endows his heroines with a crucial moral and emotional importance—whether Elise in his earlier *Maihime* or Otama in *The Wild Goose*. By revisiting concubinage from multiple angles, he lays bare both the reformist biases of the Meiji era and traditional Confucian critiques, thereby offering fresh perspectives on the inherent worth of literary representation. In all this, *The Wild Goose* stands as evidence of a wider reevaluation of Chinese narratives during the later Meiji period—one that foregrounded human emotions, social realities, and the liberation of literature from narrowly didactic aims. Ōgai’s lifelong interest in Chinese love fiction proved instrumental in shaping his nuanced approach to reform-era storytelling, enabling him to reconcile old models with emerging trends. Ultimately, his novel demonstrates that modern Japanese fiction could draw fruitfully on the depth of Ming and Qing romances, not merely to replicate their tropes, but to reframe them in a manner that reinvigorates debates on passion, virtue, and women’s agency within a changing nation.

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